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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: ASAD'S VISIT TO KSA: INITIAL REACTION IN DAMASCUS  
POSITIVE

REF: A. 09 DAMASCUS 723  
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 18

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) President Asad's January 13 trip to Riyadh, his second trip to Saudi Arabia since September, cemented opinion in Damascus that Syria and Saudi Arabia had solidified the "normalization" of bilateral relations both sides said they hoped for after King Abdullah's landmark visit to Damascus on October 7 (ref A). Local newspapers gushed about the visit, calling it "an important indication of the growing relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia." Arab diplomats took note of another step taken by the SARG to engage a "moderate" regional actor after months of warming relations with Turkey. The president's visit to Riyadh came a mere eight days after Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal visited Damascus, during which Syria indicated its support of closer relations with the Saudis to promote Arab unity and to back Yemen's government against the Houthi rebellion (ref B).

[1](#)2. (C) Vice Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad's Chief of Staff Hussam A'ala told us January 14 during a meeting at the Foreign Ministry "it was too early" to provide a readout of the Riyadh meetings, but Miqdad described Syrian-Saudi relations as "very good and moving" during a January 9 meeting. Referring to Prince Saud's January 5 visit to Damascus, Miqdad praised what he termed "a very promising relationship."

[1](#)3. (C) Journalists and Arab diplomats in Damascus, though not yet apprised of the substance of discussions in Riyadh, noted SARG statements following the meeting condemning attacks against Saudi territory near the Yemeni border and support for "the territorial integrity and stability of Yemen." They also pointed to the SARG's declaration "underlying the urgent need to end the Palestinian division" as an indication the two countries were engaging on Palestinian reconciliation. Following Khaled Misha'al's visit to Riyadh earlier this month and reports Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas would travel to Damascus as early as this weekend, observers were watching closely to see whether the two sides would work with the Egyptians in attempts to broker an accord between the Palestinian factions.

[1](#)4. (C) The Egyptian Embassy told us that President Hosni Mubarak's participation in the Asad-Abdullah meeting was seriously considered as recently as January 11. An Egyptian diplomat said the embassy was contacted by Cairo to see whether they could support a visit should the meeting take place in Damascus. The diplomat said Mubarak may meet Asad before the Arab Summit scheduled for March. The Algerian embassy said January 14 it had heard from Syrian contacts such a meeting was "a strong possibility," though it might not take place before significant progress is made on Egyptian efforts to broker a reconciliation accord among the Palestinians.

15. (C) COMMENT: One robin doesn't make a spring, but two pairs of high-level reciprocal visits between Damascus and Riyadh seem to portend better days ahead in the long-troubled Saudi-Syrian relationship.

HUNTER